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Drive is on to quash new parking rules BIAs, churches rally to force committee to take another look at downtown parking regime

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Business and community groups are trying to reverse a City of Ottawa plan to find millions of dollars in additional revenue with a new parking regime.

In December, city council voted to boost parking meter rates, increase the number of neighbourhoods with paid parking and charge for parking at night and on weekends. The changes have community groups and business people predicting severe consequences for downtown.

On Monday, Rev. Lindsay Harrison, of St. Patrick's Basilica, said the area's churches may not survive if high parking charges discourage parishioners from coming downtown. St. Patrick's, which is in the middle of a \$10-million restoration, draws between 2,500 and 3,000 people to its weekend masses, but a majority of those are from outlying neighbourhoods.

"All the downtown churches know that it's going to have a profound effect on them," said Father Harrison. "I would worry about the fate of this church. It's a profound change."

Rev. Doug Kendall, the minister at Knox Presbyterian Church at Elgin and Lisgar streets, said charging for parking in the evenings and on weekends will make it hard for people to attend choir practices, committee meetings, and Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous sessions in his church. As well, churchgoers will not want to run out to feed parking meters on Sundays, he said.

Some business owners are predicting a 10-per-cent drop in sales should the new rules come into effect, said Jasna Jennings, executive director of the ByWard Market Business Improvement Area. She said customers will head to big-box stores and outlying malls instead.

"This is really a punitive measure against the downtown core," said Ms. Jennings. "It's essentially a new tax."

Officials have estimated that if all the new parking changes are made, including pay-and-display systems replacing meters, the city's income from paid parking will go from \$5.6 million to \$13 million by the end of 2009.

Gerry LePage, head of the Bank Street Promenade Business Improvement Area, said council is suddenly changing a 25-year policy of free parking on weeknights and weekends in many downtown neighbourhoods.

He says there's been enough interest in the issue that there's a chance of reversing council's decision, in the same way it reversed decisions to stop collecting yard waste and drastically reduce its grass cutting.

On Saturday, a coalition of six business improvement areas - Bank Street, Downtown Rideau, ByWard Market, Sparks Street, Preston Street and Vanier - took out a full-page advertisement in the Citizen with the headline: "Enough is Enough." The ad urged Ottawans to speak up and contact councillors who voted for the new parking regime.

The business groups hope the city's transportation committee, which is meeting on Wednesday, would listen to their concerns and take the first step in reversing the decision.

On Monday, River Ward Councillor Maria McRae, the committee's chairwoman, said there has been such a citywide reaction to the parking changes that the city needs to hold a special meeting of her committee to deal with the issue. Ms. McRae said the city is being criticized for not consulting the public about all of the changes, so she wants a well-advertised, planned meeting to get a thorough public airing.

"We're hearing from everybody. We need to listen to the public on this," she said. "I'm very open to reopening this."

Councillor Clive Doucet, of Capital Ward, says the parking changes will be disastrous for downtown. He wants to see them delayed for at least a year while the issue is reviewed, and it could be his motion that is debated at the special meeting.

Mr. Doucet said councillors did not understand the importance of their decision during the long, tiring budget talks of December, including the fact that suburban voters who go downtown would also be affected.

"They thought it was just a city centre problem. It's a citywide problem," Mr. Doucet said.

Kanata South Councillor Peggy Feltmate said she has had a lot of negative reaction and is prepared to change her vote on at least some issues, such as evening and weekend parking. But she needs to know where the city will find the money that will be lost.

Gloucester-Southgate Councillor Diane Deans said council "is getting a ton of feedback" and "needs to revisit" its parking policy.

"Downtown is the heart and soul of the city. It appears to be a pretty unpopular decision," said Ms. Deans. "From time to time, we get one wrong."

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